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NATIONAL PROVERBS  
JAPAN

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*Others in Preparation.*

NATIONAL  
PROVERBS:  
*JAPAN*



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*THE Proverbs of a Nation are not only an epitome of its wisdom, but crystallise for us much of its national temperament and popular habits of thought. Nowhere, perhaps, can what are regarded as the national traits be so compactly presented as in these saws and proverbs.\* In the preparation of the present series the utmost care has been taken to unearth those sayings which are in danger of falling into disuse, and are not widely known. The commonplace Proverbs have, in most cases, been rejected ; little-known sources have been investigated, and everything possible done to give, in each case, the cream of the available material. The Editors will be very grateful to hear of any good but little-known Proverbs which readers may be able to add to the present collections.*





## *National Proverbs*

**C**RAFTY eyes and loose lips  
were never modelled on the  
face of virtue.

Virtue carries a lean purse.

If a post is smeared with the  
mud of the river-bed, it's little  
use its head aspiring to the  
heavens.

## *National Proverbs*

He who hunts two hares, leaves one and loses the other.

The echo answers the voice.

The mile is long to him who is tired.

If there are two fires in one room, both will smoke.

The second word makes the fray.

## *Japan*

Though you lock the door ever  
so securely trouble will find a  
way in.

Even in a village of eight there's  
generally a patriot to be found.

In the house where the samisen  
is played all day long there will  
be little rice in the larder.

It's no use cutting a stick when  
the fight is over.

## *National Proverbs*

A bad daughter-in-law is worse than a thousand devils.

When the wild geese fly South and the first reed dies put on another garment.

All colours are the same to a blind man.

The love-lorn maiden under the plum tree forgets that the kettle is simmering on the hibachi.

## *Japan*

The way of the slothful is a hedge of thorns.

When all men praised the peacock for his beautiful tail, the birds cried out with one consent "Look at his legs! and what a voice!"

It is difficult to be strong and not be rash.

If every day was a sunny day who would not wish for rain.

## *National Proverbs*

When the first reed dies one knows that Autumn's at the door.

It's generally the wickedest man who knows the nearest path to the shrine.

Valiancy and boastfulness never buckle on the same sword.

Avoid three things—a snake, a smooth-tongued man, and a wanton woman.

## *Japan*

If a man steals gold he's put in prison; if he steals a land he's made king.

A perfect vase never came from a bad potter's wheel.

Make your plans for the year at the beginning; correct your wife from the first day.

Never follow on the heels of a sorrow or it may turn back.



## *National Proverbs*

A lie has no legs, but scandalous wings.

Doing nothing is doing ill.

Game is cheaper in the market, but sweeter in the field.

A bow long bent waxeth weak.

Daylight will peep through a very small hole.

## *Japan*

Never trust a woman even if she  
has borne you seven children.

The stone may hurt the dog but  
not as much as the hand that  
threw it.

The acolyte at the gate reads  
scriptures he has never learnt.

Love does not recognise the  
difference between peasant and  
mikado.

## *National Proverbs*

There is more delight in hope than in enjoyment.

He who makes the edge of a sword visible, must destroy its keenness.

The laden almond tree by the wayside is sure to be bitter.

Going downhill no one is old.

He who is in haste fishes in an empty pool.

## *Japan*

One meal without rice mars  
domestic happiness for a week.

Physic for healing, soup for  
nourishment, and sakè for happy  
living.

The man who makes the first bad  
move always loses the game.

Better mend old garments as a  
poor man's wife than put on rich  
ones as a geisha.

## *National Proverbs*

Even the lords of hell bow the knee to the fat purse.

Everything must wait its turn—peach-blossoms for the second month and chrysanthemums for the ninth.

A cold hibachi has no glow, nor a hungry man wit.

Skilful workmen need not travel afar to earn their bread.

## *Japan*

A knowledge of the sacred books  
is the beginning of sorrow.

The sparrow flying in the rear of  
the hawk thinks the hawk is  
fleeing.

The little snake studies the ways  
of the big serpent.

One dog yelping at nothing will  
set ten thousand straining at their  
collars.

## *National Proverbs*

If a few sen do not go, many sen will not come.

At ten years a wonder-child ; at fifteen a talented youth ; at twenty a common man.

Happiness rarely keeps company with an empty stomach.

Getting money is like digging with a needle ; spending it like water soaking into sand.

## *Japan*

Even the street-dog knows the  
house of a poor man.

Those discontented with their fate  
will accuse even the sun of  
partiality.

To forgive the unrepentant is like  
making pictures on water.

When a poor man visits his rela-  
tions they do not hurry to kiss  
his feet.



## *National Proverbs*

Better go without medicine than call in a clumsy physician.

Don't look on the gold pieces you won ; rather consider those you might have lost.

Whoever can see three days ahead will be rich three thousand years.

Following Happiness is like chasing the wind, or clutching the shadow.

## *Japan*

Even Fuji is without beauty to  
one who is hungry and cold.

Brothers quarrel like thieves inside  
a house, but outside their swords  
leap out in each other's defence.

A man with a sour face should  
not open a shop.

Make sure of a thrifty wife, even  
if you have to wear your shoes  
out looking for her.

## *National Proverbs*

One doesn't take a butcher's knife to carve the rib of a fowl.

What's an inch in the eye of a man is a foot in the eye of his master.

It is foolish to fight the wall after the thieves are gone.

The character of a man depends on whether he has good or bad friends.

## *Japan*

If two men quarrel, even their dogs will have a difference.

If a workman sleeps away goes his job ; if a tiger sleeps off goes its hide.

Even the Mikado's household knows when salt and rice are dear.

The life of man is like a long journey with a heavy load on the back.

## *National Proverbs*

It is foolish to try and graft a bamboo shoot on a cherry tree.

If the hen crows instead of the cock there won't be peace in the fowlyard.

Better go without rice for a little than be in debt for long.

Those who travel on horseback know nothing of the toil of those who travel on foot.

## *Japan*

If you pray to a Buddha, pray to one only.

The path of duty lies in what is near at hand ; and men seek for it in what is remote.

The eyes of a hireling are attracted by money, as a fly's by blood.

The man who has once been bitten by a snake fears every piece of rope.

## *National Proverbs*

Deceive, but don't insult, the rich and powerful.

Who is bred on a river dies in the river.

A mended lid to a cracked pot.

The heaviest rains fall on the leaky house.

A wise man in a fool's service is a clear pearl thrown into lacquer.

## *Japan*

Among flowers the cherry-blossom,  
among men the Samurai.

A man's good name is as precious  
to him as its skin is to a tiger.

A cheap purchase is money lost.

Where there isn't any water one  
can't sail ships.

The wind and the cherry-blossom  
can never be good friends.



## *National Proverbs*

Who can speak well can also lie well.

If a man is poor and humble even his own wife and children will despise him ; if he is rich and powerful even the folk of far-off countries will heap praises on him.

Good physic always tastes bitter.

One doesn't expect to find grass growing in a market-place.

## *Japan*

A long life or a happy life lies in the lap of the gods.

To overcome evil is worth three pieces of gold; to have none in the heart is worth five.

It's easier to rule a kingdom than regulate a family.

Let a man so act by day that he may lie happily on his mat by night.

## *National Proverbs*

Wise people do not contend  
against the tongues of fools.

A man who always wears his best  
kimono has no Sunday clothes.

Unpolished pearls never shine.

A sorrow is an itching place that  
is made worse by scratching.

The spell of gold can put wit into  
a fool's mouth.

## *Japan*

If a man is hungry anything tastes good.

When the oil is exhausted the lamp dies out.

Every man carries a parasite somewhere.

There's no tree that bears gold fruit.

He who wants little seldom goes wrong.

## *National Proverbs*

He who falls in love has come to the end of happiness.

The butterfly, tempted by the flower, gets lured into the spider's web.

The best crops are always on the fields of others.

The reputation of a thousand years may be determined by the conduct of one hour.

## *Japan*

Though tears fall they do not  
help to pay the debt.

It is better to be the beak of a  
hen than the tail of an ox.

Not to know is to be a Buddha.

Excessive tenderness is followed  
by a hundredfold dislike.

Even with washing charcoal does  
not become white.

## *National Proverbs*

Quarrelsome people always live  
roof to roof.

Two swords cannot be contained  
in one scabbard.

To the ant a few drops of rain is  
a flood.

Spilt water cannot be gathered up  
again.

Better the dumplings than the  
apple blossom.

## *Japan*

In the hum of the market there  
is money, but under the cherry  
tree there is rest.

When a rat crosses the street  
everyone cries : "Hit him."

At cleaning-time everyone should  
yield to the woman with the  
broom.

He who sits in, and he who pulls  
the rickshaw are alike men.



## *National Proverbs*

Under a powerful general there are no feeble soldiers.

There's no ease for the whole mouth when one tooth is aching.

Better breeding than birth.

When drinking sakè remember the poverty of your family.

If one man praises you a thousand will repeat the praise.

## *Japan*

A road of a thousand miles begins  
with one step.

The fallen blossom does not return  
to the branch.

Kindness is more binding than a  
loan.

A fog cannot be dispelled by a  
fan.

There's no medicine for lovesick-  
ness and a fool.

## *National Proverbs*

Give a costly sword to the warrior ;  
paint and powder to the beautiful  
woman.

When puss mourns for the mouse  
do not take her seriously.

There's no door for the buying  
that will shut out the world of  
men.

Even the Emperor has straw-  
sandalled relations.

## *Japan*

Fall seven times, stand up the eighth time.

In the widow's house there is no fat mouse.

Many captains, and the ship goes to the rocks.

Pinch yourself and know how others feel.

Too much courtesy becomes discourtesy.

## *National Proverbs*

The bravest of men may be harassed by the want of one sen.

Destroy all passions when you light Buddha's lamp.

Even the heart has its boundaries.

The bosoms of the wise are the tombs of secrets.

The tongue of woman is her sword, which never rusts.

## *Japan*

A satiated mouth soon forgets  
the benefactor.

Think about the misfortunes of  
others, that you may be satisfied  
with your own lot.

A good rat will not eat the grain  
near its own hole.

Cold tea and cold rice are bearable;  
but cold looks and cold words are  
unendurable.

## *National Proverbs*

The heron's a saint when there  
are no fish about.

The bird that offers itself to the  
net is fair game to the fowler.

A lean dog shames his master.

Learning without wisdom is a load  
of books on an ass's back.

A young wife should be but a  
shadow and an echo in her house.

## *Japan*

Cast no dirt into the well that  
gives you water.

Where profit is, loss is hidden  
near by.

Even the street-dog has his lucky  
days.

Even in hell one finds companion-  
ship.

A woman's thoughts are after-  
thoughts.



## *National Proverbs*

While there's fire in one's cooking-stove guests will never cease to arrive.

If a man be great even his dog will wear a proud look.

If you wish to learn the highest truth you must begin with the alphabet.

The biggest of serpents has no terrors for the eagle.

## *Japan*

Even the hawk and the street-dog  
have their friends.

One written word is worth a  
thousand pieces of gold.

Any soil will do to bury in.

One good word can warm three  
winter months.

In plenty think of want; in want  
do not presume on plenty.

## *National Proverbs*

A good drum does not require hard striking.

Winnow while the wind is blowing.

The cleverest of lies only lasts a week.

Lend money to a city, but never to a man.

It's the little wheels of a waggon that go first.

## *Japan*

Those whose care extends not far  
ahead will find their troubles near  
at hand.

You can't put two sho of sakè  
into a one-sho bottle.

Buy land that slopes toward the  
centre and marry a girl whose  
mother is good.

Two things never pall—a moon-  
light night and well-cooked rice.

## *National Proverbs*

When the great serpent travels  
crane-flies keep out of its track.

If you must be a dog it's best to  
be the dog of a samurai.

A beaten soldier fears a reed.

A man learns little from victory  
—much from defeat.

Look the other way when the girl  
at the tea-house smiles.

## *Japan*

The eye is harder to please than the stomach.

A thing tied too tight often unties itself.

Where there are fish there must be water.

The barber never curls his own hair.

A handful of rice is wealth to a starving man.

## *National Proverbs*

From poverty to profusion is a hard journey, but the way back is easy.

When you're thirsty it's too late to think about digging a well.

One can stand still in a flowing stream, but not in the world of men.

Success is the foundation-stone on which happiness is built.

## *Japan*

Put a small fish on the hook to  
catch a large one.

To the eye of a crow its young  
one has milk-white feathers.

Talk will never cook rice.

The rich man's fowls never know  
the want of grain.

When the wild geese fly they have  
the sense to follow their leader.



## *National Proverbs*

There are gods in everything—  
even in hell.

When families quarrel outsiders  
deride.

It's the poor who give alms to  
the poor.

What is quickly learnt is soon  
forgotten.

Only for love one goes to Kanda  
and back.

## *Japan*

When man takes fire into his  
bosom he provokes his own  
calamity.

He who never suffers persecution  
will never become a Buddha.

A woman's tongue is only three  
inches long, but it can kill a man  
six feet high.

The pebble in the brook secretly  
thinks itself a precious stone.

## *National Proverbs*

It's no use giving gold coins to a cat.

A man's teeth often bite his own tongue.

One cannot learn to swim in a field.

No standing in the world without stooping.

When you're in need of help don't ask the devil for aid.

## *Japan*

The fiercest serpent may be overcome by a swarm of ants.

A bridled tongue is a guarantee of a care-free heart.

Applause is the beginning of abuse.

It's the tortoise that discounts the value of a pair of fast legs.

One good deed is better than three days of fasting at a shrine.

## *National Proverbs*

When fortune comes to a house  
the devil accompanies it to the  
door.

A determined will will drive  
through a granite rock.

Be civil to a mother-in-law and  
she will come to your house three  
times a day.

You can't expect blossom from a  
dead cherry tree.

## *Japan*

Hate a priest and you will hate  
his very hood.

When folly passes by, reason  
draws back.

There's always a bee to sting a  
weeping face.

Amateur tactics cause grave  
wounds.

Where there's a beginning there's  
an end.

## *National Proverbs*

Never ask your guest whether you shall kill your chicken.

When the wild geese start the mud-flies also prepare for flight.

A borrowed cat catches no mice.

Even a dead cherry tree can bring picturesqueness to a barren hill.

Laughter cannot bring back what anger has driven away.

## *Japan*

Even if you put a snake in a bamboo tube you cannot change its wriggling disposition.

Better to wash an old kimono than borrow a new one.

The drunkard knows not the shame of wine—nor the abstinent its glow.

Keep a sharp edge on your sword and your honour.



## *National Proverbs*

No purse so fat as to buy back a lost appetite.

Whoever touches a stricken snake feels its fangs.

One can see the heavens through a needle's eye.

A man's heart and the autumn sky are alike fickle.

Every highroad leads to the Mikado's palace.

## *Japan*

A man's own breast is the best wallet to carry his troubles in.

Better do one act quickly than talk about a hundred for a day.

All married women are not wives.

Like ginger and cinnamon men become more pungent with age.

Even a mountain can be worn away by the tread of many feet.

## *National Proverbs*

There's no tree in the forest that bears cooked rice.

If you have to kill a snake, kill it once and for all.

Lepers are always envious of those with sores.

A friend at hand is better than relatives at a distance.

It only takes a little twig to poke out the eye.

## *Japan*

Even the mightiest wind can stir  
up no waves in the underground  
well.

The hole the crab digs takes on  
the shape of its shell.

The only child who really re-  
sembles his parent is a son of the  
devil.

Even the frog's croak in the well  
is music to its mate.

## *National Proverbs*

Women and workmen are difficult things to handle.

Metal is tested by fire; men by wine.

One word of thanks reaches up to Heaven.

When you aim at the rat beware of the vase.

Any place is good enough to bury a dead rat in.

## *Japan*

Who travels for love finds a  
thousand miles only one mile.

Better to be proficient in one art  
than an amateur in a hundred.

What one does, one becomes.

. Even the clumsy swordsmith  
sometimes makes a good sword.

He who can use his tongue can  
find out any road.

## *National Proverbs*

At the first cup man drinks wine,  
at the second wine drinks wine,  
at the third wine drinks man.

It's the biggest cherry-tree that  
attracts the wind.

He who gives away coals when it  
is snowing is a noble man—or a  
fool.

The great man is he who does  
not lose his child's love.

## *Japan*

The bird flying in the air does  
not fear the water.

It's the physician that breaks the  
rules of health.

One can't lap up the ocean with  
a shell.

To the rat a thief is the same as a  
samurai.

When there isn't any needle,  
thread is not of much use.



## *National Proverbs*

Even the peach grown in the shade will ripen in the end.

The umbrella-maker's apprentice will turn the world upside down in trying to mend one umbrella.

What has been the fashion once will come into fashion again.

Even the young crow has the grace to return part of its food to its parent.

## *Japan*

After a victory we should bind  
the helm-band tighter.

To hear a hundred times is not  
so good as to see once.

Ten men, ten minds.

A pig used to dirt turns up its  
nose at rice boiled in milk.

A truthful wanton is as great a  
miracle as a square egg.

## *National Proverbs*

The string of a man's sack of patience is generally tied with a slip-knot.

Don't condemn till you've heard both sides of the case.

One cannot tell what passes through the heart of a man by the look on his face.

Troubles follow the restless like flies in the fifth month.

## *Japan*

At the foot of a lighthouse one  
finds darkness.

A small-minded man looks at the  
sky through a reed.

Be a serpent save in the poison.

It's always the lazybones who  
wants to work on a holiday.

When the sweat has dried the  
labour's forgotten.

## *National Proverbs*

Even the wildest horses have to take the bit at last.

The empire or the ash-box will grow dirtier the more that's poured into them—gold or ashes.

Don't prophesy to the man who can see farther than you can.

Even if your mouth is parched don't drink water from a robber's well.

## *Japan*

The frog who has never seen the sea thinks the well a fine stretch of water.

A poor man is short of wit, a lean horse long of hair.

There are some gods who abandon men ; they are those gods who know men.

There's always a floating piece of wood to help a blind tortoise.

## *National Proverbs*

A man knows how to spend a million yen in marrying off his daughter, but does not know how to spend a hundred thousand in bringing up his child.

When you buy a vase cheap look for the flaw, and when a man offers favours search for his purpose.

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